

CAPTAINS LOG

Wednesday, October 7, 2009

Pilgrimage to Best Friends



We traveled East over the southern Sierra Mountains on roads I have never been on in my whole life, even though I had grown up in California. It's a shame that I had not known about these roads because the areas they covered were unusual and uninhabited, one of my favorite combinations. For some insane reason I decided we should go through Death Valley on our route home, my "reasoning" being that it was almost October and how hot could it be? To get there we headed toward Angels Camp, famous from Mark Twain's frog jumping competition of Calaveras County story (and the night we stayed there I did see MASSIVE bullfrogs out in the



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Wendy Liebman

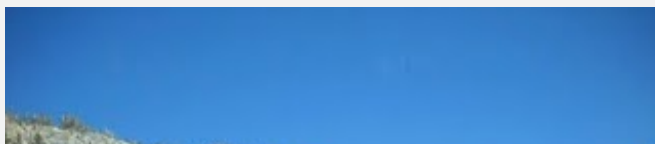
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Followers

deserty area and pried more than one from Bonnie's eager mouth). Mark Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" was first published in 1865 and it was one of his earliest writings; the town plays up their brush with fame in corny/touristy fashion. Angels Camp is off Highway 49, east of Stockton and is an old gold mining town. I have never heard of a single person who became really rich off the gold of California so it makes me wonder exactly what drew the miners? Were the gold fields like old time casinos where you went and gambled that you might be the one in one million who hit it rich with the big strike? Angels Camp has turned itself into a beautiful tourist town and I would definitely go back and spend more time there to delve into the history and amazing caves that blanket the area. But Death Valley called.



We headed East on Highway 108, the infamous Sonora



Pass highway, the second highest pass over the Sierra Nevada mountains. I didn't know it was infamous until after we made it over the pass alive but shaken. A road sign said "Trailers over 25 feet not advised" and since we are 56 feet with the car attached I suggested we better turn around. Walt said, "we'll be fine" and continued on. 25% grades and curly cue turns on the edge of 9650 foot mountains are always a good way to reconnect with your higher power and test the strength of your marital bonds. While we may all fantasize about killing our spouses occasionally we don't necessarily want to be on the same Glory Train as them. There are lots of camping sites (mostly for tent campers) and this would be a beautiful place to camp, high enough to be cool year round and varied enough to have lots to do. We found a NFS campground near the town of Bridgeport called



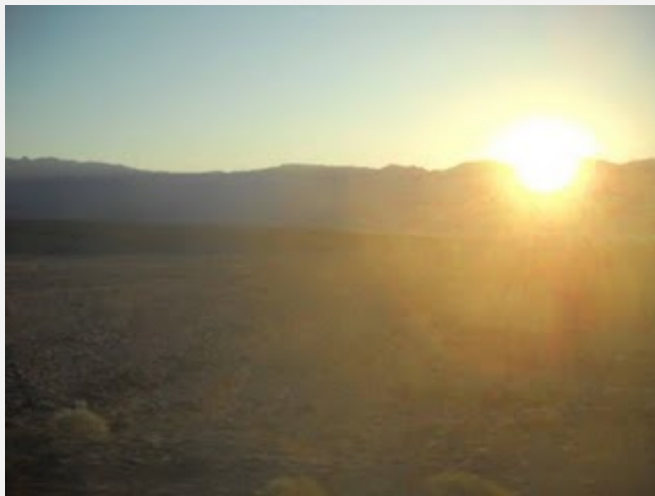
Trumbell Lake and we had one of the best views ever from our site. The fall colors were coming out and the area was cold and crisp at night; we hated to leave but took Highway 395 on to Death Valley.



The Death Valley scenery is so bleak and so rugged it gives you a strange feeling that you are on another planet. It is a fascinating landscape but the winding roads and gusts of dry wind made our progress slow going. We pulled into our campground (whose telling name "Furnace Creek" should have warned me) late, about 6:40 p.m. and it was still 108 degrees. The austere little campground had no

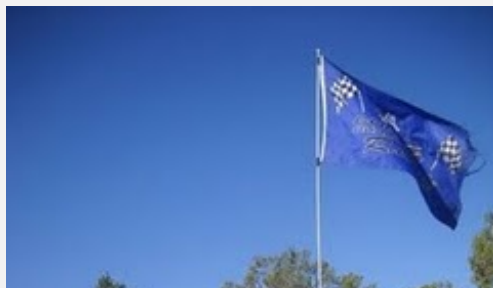


water or electricity and the sign saying "generators allowed 7 a.m. to 7 p.m." made us groan since without the generator we couldn't run the AC. Since the entire campground only had about 10 people in it we kept our generator on past hours to cool the RV down for the night. I foolishly told Walt that I thought the temperature would 'plummet' when the sun went down and he kept asking in a sarcastic way if the temperature had 'plummeted yet' as we lay there sweating all night. As it was, it was a long hot night and we bugged out early to beat the heat. There were places to visit in Death Valley but we decided we needed to come back in December or January to be able to safely travel with the dogs. I am always afraid if we leave them in the car with the car on and the AC running we will come out to find the car engine quit and the dogs will be baked to crisps in the car. We usually leave them in the RV which stays cool and has a temperature sensor but our generator had gone hinky on us and we didn't trust it to keep the RV cool without guidance.





So we moved on to our next destination which was Best Friends Animal Sanctuary near Kanab, Utah. Kanab is famous for being one of the "gateways" to Zion Park, one of the most beautiful desert parks in the U.S. We found 'Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park to camp at near Kanab and it was a wonderful, small State Park (and the sand dunes were truly coral pink and glowed in the afternoon sun). This was the only SP I've seen that caters to OHV (Off Highway Vehicles) and it is so popular we were lucky to find one of the 22 sites available. There were people there with dune buggies (\$25,000, 180 HP, not the dune buggies of your childhood), ATVs, all



kinds of crazy vehicles and they traveled in packs (clubs mostly) and roared in and out of camp and out into the desert. Walt was fascinated and crept from campsite to campsite looking and taking pictures. October is the beginning of the tourist season in that area because of the beautiful weather and there were lots of foreign tourists in the area along with OHV people and animal lovers like us.



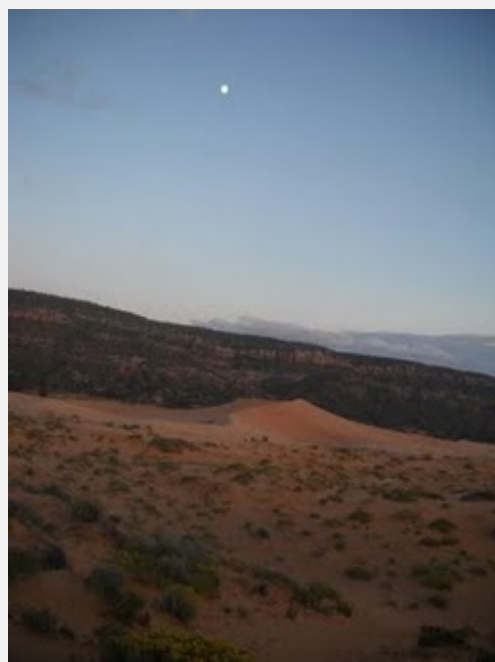
We headed into Best Friends, located in part of Kanab Canyon about 5 miles outside Kanab, and took the hour and a half tour and visited



some of the buildings as well as got an overview of the sanctuary. Best Friends is sort of the Mecca for people in animal rescue, an



amazing place that does everything right and if you are lucky you get to come pay homage and learn from the masters.



To truly see everything you would have to stay and volunteer for several days or even weeks

(which many people do)

and BF very actively encourages that. We

decided we would go

back on our next trip and

stay a few weeks and

check the area out and

get some volunteering

in. Best Friends has

become more high

profile since they started

filming the very popular

"Dog Town" on National Geographic which follows

the stories of dogs that

come into BF. The

sanctuary resides on

several thousand acres

in Angel Canyon, some

of the most unusual and

beautiful geography you

will ever see. One of the

staff told me, "we know how lucky we are to work

here, it is like being on

an "E" ticket ride at

Disneyland". The

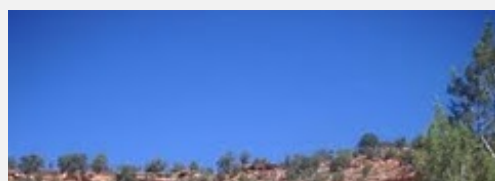
landscape is so startling

it almost DOES look like

something Disney

created for one of their

rides. A group of



rescuers started with a few hundred acres many years ago and eventually the sanctuary grew into what it is today which is a multi-million dollar state of the art rescue facility for dogs, cats, birds, horses and mules, pigs and probably a few other creatures as well. The sanctuary currently holds between 1500 to 2000 animals at any time and they have many animals that get adopted and some that will probably never get adopted because of behavioral or health issues. These animals will live out their lives there with people who care about them and interact daily with them.



The staff are very eager to share their place and their animals with visitors and the tours and films are free. We started at the Visitor Center which houses



some staff offices, the little theater room and the gift store and left in a large van from there.



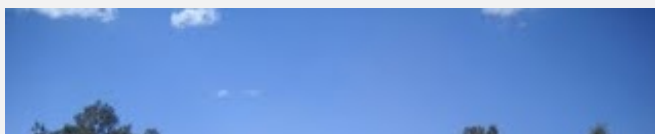
After driving by the horse and potbelly pig areas (in the interest of time separate tours are required to go in those buildings) we wound our way up the canyon to the outdoor pastures where some of the healthier mules and horses stay during the day. We went inside one part of one of the cat buildings, an FIV (feline leukemia) ward where all the cats were fairly social. The setup was amazing and I kept thinking how much my sister Pat would like to see how they had it situated. Rafters with pathways, beds, and planks for cats who did not want to interact, toys and cat condos everywhere, comfy furniture for the cats to lay on and a group of volunteers just hanging around petting the cats who wanted attention. The buildings are designed like an octagon and each area has an indoor and outdoor part that the animals move freely between. They had an entire separate building for feral cats that had come in. Our guide, Laura, told us that 75% of healthy feral cats



are rehabilitated and adopted out eventually. BF is active with TNR which stands for 'trap, neuter, release' which is one of the few ways of successfully dealing with feral cat populations.



We moved on to the new area where they are constructing several new buildings to house puppies, small dogs, and puppy mill dogs that come to the sanctuary. BF has chosen to tackle the problem of educating the public in not buying puppy mill dogs or dogs from pet stores (which are puppy mill dogs) and that is one of the newer directions that BF has become involved in. The dog compound we visited was for dogs who got along with humans and other dogs (what they call "green collar dogs") and these dogs were all up for adoption; I saw several large, young



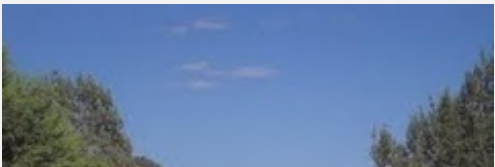
knuckleheads that I would have loved to adopt but 3 is about all our RV is equipped for. Like the cat facilities these have indoor/outdoor sections but their outdoor part was very large with toys, trees, water pools and lots of things for dogs to do. Most of the dogs are large, mixed breed dogs and our guide told us they actually have a waiting list of adopters for small dogs. She also said they get 1,000 emails a month asking them to take dogs in and they have to pick and choose carefully to avoid being overrun.



The last place we drove by was one of the most interesting, it was at the sanctuary cemetery called 'Angel's Rest'. Thousands upon thousands of wind chimes hang over the graves of all the animals buried there and the wind rushes through the canyon and keeps the area awash in their music. Many of the animals are from the BF sanctuary but the public can also buy a space and marker to place their pet



there. I'm not big on the idea of graveyards but this one was beautiful and unique, as you walk through and see the markers and mementos it makes your heart ache. Walt and I ended up going back there several times to catch the light as it fell on the place and bask in the serenity. There was a real sense of peace and timelessness there. If anybody wants to learn more about their place go to their website at <http://www.bestfriends.org/>





Our time in Kanab and at Best Friends was some of the nicest of our whole trip, we continued our almost freakish good luck with amazing weather. I think in 4+ months of traveling we have hit two rain days and only a few days so cold or so hot that it was uncomfortable outside. We decided to head East across the top of New Mexico to check out Taos and the surrounding area.



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